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DISCOURSE OF AGEING IN TINA HOWE'S *A MARRIAGE CYCLE*

In his 1987 book *Who needs theatre* Robert Brustein argues that theatre "represents social history in the making, both on the stage and in the audience" (4). This definition of theatre remains true up till nowadays with the highlighting of numerous postpostmodernist upheavals, among them – worldwide growth of population ageing. Though there are numerous projects devoted to ageing in sociology, anthropology, psychology and other related branches of humanities (Rosenthal, Johnson, Thane, Pearsall, Rubin, Donahue, Coyle), yet books on ageing in fiction have recently started to appear. The prolonged life expectancy in developed countries provokes contemporary scholars (B.F.Waxman, M.Hepworth) to trace down the issue of ageing reflected in fiction and in dramatic pieces in particular. Literary gerontology as an interdisciplinary and independent field originates in the 1990s (Anne M. Wyatt-Brown) with strong emphasis on studying ageing primarily in novels. At that time Barbara Waxman produces "From the hearth to the open road" coming up with the concept of the Reifungsroman or Fiction of Ripening reflected in the novels of Doris Lessing, Barbara Pym and other women writers. Diana Wallace in her essay on "Literary portrayals of ageing" singles out important features that Waxman identified – "a narrative structure that focuses on a journey or quest for self-knowledge; a narrative voice, either first person or third person omniscient, which draws the reader into the ageing protagonist's world; the use of dreams or flashbacks for life review; a concern with the physical body and illness; and a sense that, even in frail old age, there is the possibility of an opening up of life" (394). These five markers will be relied on to

examine the process of ageing in Tina Howe's comedies in the present paper. In the collection "Aging and identity: a humanities perspective" the contributors illuminate simultaneously construction and deconstruction of stereotypic images of the ageing of Western society in literature, the fine arts, and the popular media. In this 1999 issue the analyses of old age characters in drama, namely in plays by W. Shakespeare and G. B. Shaw, were first introduced. British sociologists Mike Hepworth and Mike Featherstone are gurus of the theoretical framework of the process of growing older in their numerous works. Mike Hepwood hit his stride with a book of stories concerning ageing (meaning full-length novels) published in 2000.

American theater-goers have several successful productions of the 2013 play on ageing *The Velocity of Autumn by* Eric Coble. These conspicuous works reveal an array of many more plays portraying the aging process and old age characters in recent decades. Among them *The Cripple of Inishmaan* by Martin McDonagh (1996), *Waiting To Be Invite*d by S.M.Shephard-Massat (1996), *The Exact Center of the Universe* by Joan Vail Thorne (1999), *The Butterfly Collection* by Theresa Rebeck (2000), *August: Osage County* by Tracy Letts (2007) to name just a few.

Birth and After Birth

Tina Howe is one of the prominent US dramatists speaking onstage about ageing. The philosophy of transformation and dynamics of human experience has always been present in her works starting with *The Art of Dining* (1979), *Painting Churches* (1983), and *Coastal Disturbances* (1986). An outstanding American writer in her late seventies Howe has at least twelve full-length plays to her credit. TCG published two collections of Tina's comedies (1989, 2010) and a play-finalist for the 1997 Pulitzer Prize *Pride's Crossing* (1998). Though all three publications have much to contribute to the so-called narrative of decline, the present paper is

focused on the literary representations of ageing and old age in the most recent volume *Birth and After Birth and Other Plays* subtitled *A Marriage Cycle*. It comprises four compelling works and several complicated marriages inside them. The third marriage in the cycle is a study case of middle-aged family challenges in *One Shoe Off* rather than an age-related play. The ageing process and portraits of young and deep old age characters abound in *Birth and After Birth*, *Approaching Zanzibar*, and *Rembrandt's Gift*.

Conceived and written in the 1970s, yet produced professionally years later in 1995 and on, *Birth and After Birth* introduces Sandy Apple in her early 30s anxious of premature ageing with her head drying up and leaking and hair falling out. On the fourth birthday of their son, Sandy and Bill Apples make up their own stories of ageing:

> *BILL: … Time passes in the blink of an eye, Nick. Take it from your old man, before you know it you'll be crumpled up in a nursing home wondering where your life went…*
> *SANDY: Look at me! And now my hair is falling out. Poor Mommy's going bald. (Scratching and leaking more sand) When she looked in the mirror this morning, she saw an old woman.*
> *BILL: You won't be one of those lonely old men, but will have videos to entertain you and all your pals at the nursing home – birthdays, Christmases, trips to the zoo … Shit, you'll be the most popular guy in the nursing home. "Have you seen Mr. Apple's videos of his fourth birthday party?" the little old ladies will say, crowding into your room with their wheelchairs. All for that backwards glance at the radiance of youth.*
> *SANDY: Poor old leaking Mommy… Bald as an egg.* (Howe 11)

Sandy seems to find some comfort in referring to her image in the mirror – she repeats the same sentence about *becoming an old woman* four times in the development of action and only in the denouement of the comedy speaks of her inability to conceive one more child. Being quite a young woman and a young mother Sandy undergoes natural physical changes which she associates with stereotypes of ageing. Breaking the myth of "elderly" Barry D. Smith defines the latter as *being slower to move and perhaps think, having less energy and more aches, and often being saddled with one or more*

chronic disorders (404). Sandy's own psychological age (unlike her biological one) is clearly older than her chronological years. At the same time Sandy's husband Bill quite joyfully pictures his son as a graying man in a home for the elderly. Though Bill brings about his own fear of ageing, this optimistic prognosis sounds true-to-life.

A devoted adept of the theatre of the absurd Tina Howe often constructs the dialogues in the form of monologues. Thematically Sandy and Bill converse about one topic – getting older, but technically their lines are incoherent. This thematic overlapping and textual incoherence creates the effect of absurd speech of the characters. There is however a stylistic peculiarity that is typical of both wife and husband's lines – age opposites. A four-year old boy is imagined as an aged person: *"Have you seen Mr. Apple's videos of his fourth birthday party?" the little old ladies will say*. Feeling his own impending later life Bill sums it up with *All for that backwards glance at the radiance of youth*. Noteworthy is Sandy's simile – she compares her supposedly bald head with an egg which provokes obvious association with the beginning of life.

Among Barbara Waxman's distinctive features of ageing *Birth and After Birth* demonstrates three layers. First, there are two first person narrative voices belonging to Sandy and Bill (though not omniscient taking into account the specificity of dramatic genre), which draw the recipients into the ageing world. Second, Sandy's concern with her physical body and potential illness serves as an additional leitmotif of the play focusing on a celebration of birth and life as a whole. Finally, Bill's vision of his son's future can support the presumption that, *even in frail old age, there is the possibility of an opening up of life* (Wallace 394).

Approaching Zanzibar

In *Approaching Zanzibar* (1989) an American family of four, the Blossoms, travel by car from New York to visit their relative – a remarkable octogenarian Olivia Childs on her

deathbed in New Mexico. The Blossoms talk about their Aunt using diminutive forms of her name – Livvie and Liv. Similarly to the dialogue of the Apples in *Birth and After Birth* we have the serious attitude of the mother of the family (known as Charlotte to older people) and the stereotypical teasing of the elderly by Wally, her husband:

> *WALLY: It'll take us seven-five years to get there.*
> *CHARLOTTE (Opening her window): God, it's hot in here!*
> *WALLY: We'll all be in walkers!*
> *CHARLOTTE: Who is always complaining that we never take a vacation?*
> *PONY (*daughter*): Mommy…?*
> *WALLY (Putting on a creaky old voice): "Well, hi there, Livvie, we finally made it! That is you, isn't it, Liv? I don't see so good anymore."*
> *PONY: Mommy, what's Livvie dying of?*
> *TURNER (*son*): God Pony!…*
> *WALLY (Still playing aged): "Hey there, Char, want to pass me my ear trumpet? I don't hear so good neither."* (Howe 79)

This short exchange of cues in the exposition scene is significant in terms of the family trip. Whereas Charlotte keeps silent on the subject, Wally and the children overtly show their anxiety: teenagers are afraid, but their father is good at pretending that he is already in his sunset years. In Wally's vision of ageing we detect stereotyped assumption of the body's impairment (chronic disorders mentioned above).

Through the chatting of random people on a beautiful site the image of Olivia Childs is constructed via the remarks of the Blossoms. Aunt Livvie appears to be the famous artist who used to build fabric mounds and circles in the desert – a giant circle of one thousand snow white kites was known as the *Ring of Prayer*:

> *RANDY* (a man on a site)*: How does she come up with that stuff? Decorating the desert with sails and parachutes and wedding veils…?*
> *CHARLOTTE: Her pieces mark sacred Indian sites.*
> *RANDY: But don't they blow away?*
> *CHARLOTTE: That's the whole point. Her work celebrates its vulnerability to nature… Prayer is eternal, but our shrines are made of air*. (Howe 90)

Although in the previous scene Wally's mimicking of loss or deterioration of hearing abilities and eyesight adds up to the myth of "elderly", most older people *do not live alone, and are not living in nursing homes or other institutions… Finally, many are happy and satisfied, and significant accomplishments by elderly professionals are common* (Smith 404). Aunt Livvie is an embodiment of the elderly professional with positive characteristics who is open to intergenerational contact. As authors of "Aging and Identity: A Humanities Perspective" state:

A number of feminist psychologists, among them Jean Baker Miller, Dorothy Dinnerstein, Nancy Chodorow, and Carol Gilligan, speculate that in our Western society women are conditioned to foster relationships and men to develop autonomy. The gerontological discoveries (adduced so far) suggest that the melding of these seemingly contradictory (but actually complementary) qualities provide one of the secrets of creative aging. (6)

As in *Birth and After Birth* the road play has an example of age opposites. It is implemented in Charlotte's emotional response to the fact the baby they met was born on the same day as Olivia Childs. Considering this a coincidence with a 80-years gap, Charlotte unconsciously elaborates the idea of cyclicity, expressed in the subtitle of Howe's collection. Charlotte's character of mother in *Approaching Zanzibar* is central both to the understanding of ageing and life-as-a-cycle in the play. When Pony and Turner ask their mother to have some more babies, Charlotte becomes really upset: *… I can't bear it… I'll never feel life moving inside me again… It's like… like part of me is dying… The best part*. (Howe 97) Sandy Apple and Charlotte Blossom demonstrate stereotyped expectations of the ageing process in the form of utmost anxiety. Curiously the despair of early middle-aged women in Howe's comedies is opposed to the attitude of the aged characters towards "decline". Thus, a random traveler in *Approaching Zanzibar* – a sixty-three years old Palace grandmother encourages Charlotte not to give up. Having given birth to 5 children Palace

is assured that it's never too late, thus continuing the idea of cyclicity.

The image of Olivia Childs is constructed through frequent references to the aunt all the way from New York to New Mexico. After a telephone talk Charlotte reports that Livvie is not well: *I don't know which I dread more – getting there too late or having to see her suffer* (Howe 112). One of the common fears of ageing is the probability of unbearable physical suffering. In self-pity Charlotte "puts on" possible options of her own future – either death or grueling illness. Nevertheless Charlotte hopes to see her aunt alive: in her appeal "*To the top of a mountain to fry eggs with Livvie!*" (Howe 116) she metaphorically imagines the end of life as ascent, not descent.

The culmination of Howe's reflections on ageing is encoded in the final scenes of *Approaching Zanzibar*. The Blossoms eventually get to their aunt. Olivia's room is decorated in the traditions of her evanescent installations – one can feel the duality of human nature striving for the divine and material. The bed ("*like a gauze cathedral*") which dominates the eminent artist's room is about to lift off the ground, leaving a vase of orchids and an oxygen hookup down there on the table. This binary opposition of exotic flowers and respiratory system leads to the deep appreciation of the immanent life component – breathing. The Mexican nurse who tenderly cares about Olivia compares her sleeping patient's breath with that of a baby and an angel, implying the never ending cycle of life.

After waking up Livvie seems to forget who is who in her interaction with the Blossoms provoking giggling among them. However this game serves as a time-winning tool for Olivia whose slowness in response is typical of the elderly and is a major behavioral indicator of the ageing process (Smith 405). Psychologists claim nowadays that Aristotelian observation of poor memory among the elderly is nothing else but one more stereotype of ageing. Studies prove that memory declines tend to be limited to episodic memories, which relate to specific experiences (unlike semantic and implicit memories) (Feldman

464). R. Feldman suggests that "*Training older adults to use the kinds of mnemonic strategies not only may prevent their long-term memory from deteriorating, but may actually improve it*" (465). In fact, elderly people store information quite efficiently and "*The problem appears to lie in the process of getting information into memory (called encoding) and the process of retrieving it*" (Smith 406).

In spite of the seeming forgetfulness Livvie succeeds in winning love of the youngest Blossom – nine-year old Pony. At first afraid even to look at the old lady, the girl befriends Olivia recharging her aunt with juvenile energy. Demanding attention and looking for entertainment Livvie rips off her wig to show an almost bald head causing Turner's applause and Pony's admiration – she argues: "*Well, a dying old lady's got to have some fun*" (Howe 134). Playing a Geography game and bouncing on the bed makes octogenarian and teenager equal in their love of life.

Staying alone with Pony, elderly Olivia is on the edge of two worlds. This causes the various dualities of the final scene: the old lady puts on Pony's glasses (as she notes they help her remember!) and Pony tucks her head into the aunt's wig (implied cyclicity is observed in this exchange); a bedpan as a little throne for the teenager makes Livvie laugh so vigorously that she has a seizure and puts on her oxygen mask. Drifting back from another world the aunt retells her niece a reverie that actually happened. Young Olivia is on her way to the Sahara desert coming across the most beautiful man she has ever seen with enormous bouquet of poppies:

> *I was being chased down this long tunnel… I started to scream. Someone grabbed my hands. I opened my eyes. It was him! He'd jumped on the train at the last minute and was sitting across from me, eyes laughing, poppies blazing… He didn't speak a word of any language I knew, but he held me spellbound. I never made it off the train. He wrapped me in his flying carpet and wouldn't let me go. You have never seen such feverish carryings-on… He rocked me over mountains, sang me through rain forests and kissed me past ancient cities. Oh, what a ruckus we made. Well, you'll do it, too, you'll do it all, wait and see. We ended up in Zanzibar, island of cloves.* (Howe 139)

Livvie's soliloquy can be interpreted as her acceptance of impending death. First she mentions a huge bunch of poppies which have long been used as a symbol of sleep, peace, and death. The enigmatic stranger who doesn't speak any known language may be a euphemism for death. At the same time Olivia's reverie is rich in sexual connotations (*He rocked me over mountains, sang me through rain forests and kissed me past ancient cities*). Moreover sharing her intimate memories with young Pony, Livvie reassures that her niece should have similar experience one day (*Well, you'll do it, too, you'll do it all, wait and see*). Thus Tina Howe introduces the topic of sexuality of the elderly. Processing K.Woodward's "Aging and Its Discontents: Freud and Other Fictions" Diana Wallace concludes: "*Anxieties about ageing are displaced onto those about death, which are covered in turn by sexual anxieties*" (407). The fusion of erotic (cloves are associated with protection and love) and thanatic motives creates deep poetic layer of the play. Besides, sociologists report that "there are no known age limits to sexual activity" (Santrock 494). About *Approaching Zanzibar* the dramatist confesses that she intended

> *[…] to write a play that in some way would deal with some of this pain, the bewilderment, turning fifty, death, people dying, survivors, how the survivors keep going. I think because I am a mother and have my own children, and have also reached the age when I won't have any more children, I posed it as this little play about the family. The mother in the family is herself going through menopause, and part of her anguish is realizing that she won't have children anymore. And she's on this odyssey to visit this wonderfully creative old woman before she dies, and they keep running into babies along the way, which are both life-affirming and cause for great joy, but which in an odd way catch the mother up and make her sad.* (Barlow 268)

From reading *Approaching Zanzibar*, we can infer that all five markers of ageing derived from Waxman's study are present in this comedy. Beside first person voices (those of Olivia and Palace) narrating about their ageing experience, concerns with physical bodies and illnesses (Charlotte and Oivia), and a convivial denouement celebrating old age (Olivia and Pony's bouncing on the bed), the road play establishes a narrative structure of a journey of the family which gradually

turns into Charlotte's quest for self-knowledge with appreciation of ageing. Also, the playwright implements dreams and flashbacks for Olivia Childs' life review creating a rather surreal effect.

Rembrandt's Gift

The final comedy in the cycle abounds with ageing-related layers. The most impressive one deals with the chronotope – the playwright elaborates on several more binary oppositions like past/future, sunrise/sunset regarding the process of ageing. In terms of temporal deixis the exposition's setting is "*the day after tomorrow*" (Howe 215). What is remarkable is that in the course of the play the aged contemporary American couple encounters the great painter from the past. The opposition between the 17th century and "the day after tomorrow" forms a different kind of a cycle – the one that transgresses the boundaries of a marriage and makes claims to universality. Moreover the prelude states that "*the sun slowly starts to rise*" (ibid.) bringing hope to Polly and Walter. As expected in the denouement "*the light of the setting sun floods the room*" (Howe 254). This binary of sunrise/sunset is another important cycle that brings promise to the elderly characters: in *Rembrandt's Gift* appear three "young old" characters approximately in their early sixties. According to some developmentalists, there are several sub-periods: the young old fluctuates from 65 to 74, the old old from 75 and older, and even the oldest old from 85 and older (Santrock 485). In a nut shell, Polly and Walter are visited by Rembrandt van Rijn who bursts through the mirror in the couple's Manhattan apartment due to an intergalactic explosion. The plot develops around a love triangle: Polly is fascinated by the Dutch painter arousing jealousy in Walter. This conflict breaks the routine of the couple healing Walter's OCD (edited). Paradoxically this anxiety disorder affects both children and adults, thus linking opposite ages. In this respect it is worthwhile mentioning the ending lines of the

play: "*A blinding white light accompanied with swirls of smoke pours through the door. Polly pulls Walter to her side. They approach it, hand in hand, like two brave children.*" (Howe 259)

In terms of topos – configurations of space – initially the action takes place in the top-floor loft with "*towers of folded theatrical costumes, including hats, boots, kingly robes, swords and parasols* [which] *rise to the ceiling, obscuring the windows and blocking out the light*." (Howe 215). This catalogue technique rather frequent in Howe's plays reflects the problem of the superabundance of our era. Walter was an actor in the past, now he is a hoarder. His piles of costumes form a maze out of the apartment leaving almost no space for sleeping, eating and living areas. There is no logical reason for Walter to hoard stuff and it is only through fighting with Polly that he gives up some of his things.

Concentrating on the portrayal of older artists (Polly is a photographer and Walter is an actor though both are unemployed) in *Rembrandt's Gift*, Howe elucidates: "*At the end of his life, Rembrandt was bankrupt, he was broken, he was living on scraps of bread and herrings... So I figured, if Rembrandt shows up in Walter and Polly's house, and he's going through very much the same things they're going through, extraordinary things could happen*" (Worland). Introducing obsessive-compulsive disorder, snoring or problems with the prostate as symptoms of physical decline, Howe treats them humorously to overcome the fear of ageing:

> *POLLY: What are we going to do?*
> *WALTER: I'd like to see you try and urinate with a prostate the size of an Idaho potato!*
> *POLLY: Where are we going to go?*
> *WALTER: I finally fall asleep after peeing my guts out half the night and what do you do?*
> *POLLY: It's starting to get scary...*
> *WALTER: Wake me up because you can't sleep!*
> *POLLY: Very scary!*
> *WALTER: You don't give two shits about my prostate!*
> *POLLY: That's not true. I adore your prostate!*
> *WALTER: Bullshit!*

POLLY: I worship the ground it walks on.
WALTER: Prostate don't have legs!
POLLY: All right, I worship the ground it… dangles over.
WALTER (Angrily getting out of bed): Yeah, yeah… (Howe 216)

In exploring the theme of sexuality in older persons in *Rembrandt's Gift* the playwright shows the very things which possess the most value in the process of ageing – trust, friendship, memories and the past. David Shuldiner's research guide on ageing in folklore constitutes the following definition of ageing and the aged: "*… elders may have special qualities, but they are not a distinct species. We all continue to be essentially who we have been all along as we age… We may undergo dramatic personal, political and cultural transformations, but most of us age more or less ontologically intact.*" (xiii)

Conclusion

All three comedies by Tina Howe fit successfully into Waxman's paradigm of ageing in fiction briefly outlined by Diana Wallace. One should highlight the dramatist's individual manner of using binary opposition of late adulthood / early childhood to demonstrate social and emotional development of ageing in the analyzed plays. There is a considerable emphasis on erotic and thanatic interaction in the lives of characters in *Approaching Zanzibar* and *Rembrandt's Gift*. In these times of an ageing population worldwide, Tina Howe's comedies present a positive glimpse on the process of ageing.

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Key words: ageing, elderly, cyclicity, age antonymy, erotic and thanatic interaction, Tina Howe, comedies.

Streszczenie

Dyskurs starzenia się w komediach Tiny Howe *Cykl życia rodziny*

Artykuł dotyczy sposobów starzenia się w dramatach pisarki amerykańskiej, Tiny Howe. Przeanalizowano w nim etap pierwszych objawów starzenia się seniorów w dramatach takich jak m.in. "Urodzenie i po urodzeniu", "Spotkanie z Zanzibarem" oraz "Dar Rembrandta". Zwracając szczególną uwagę na rozpoznanie tego zjawiska przez kobietę-dramaturga oraz ujęcie opozycji takich jak młodość - starość, starość i Eros oraz starość i Thanatos.

Słowa kluczowe: starzenie się, oznaki starzenia się, nawroty, przeciwieństwa, interakcja Eros-Thanatos, Tina Howe, komedia